

Isaiah 58:1-11
Luke 6:47-49
September 20, 2009

Home Sweet Home

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home;
A charm from the sky seems to hallow us there
Which seek thro the world is not met with elsewhere
Home Sweet Home there is no place like home
There is no place like home

These are the words to an 1823 song that Dorothy chanted as she returned home from Oz. These are the sentiments Frodo and Samwise shared on their quest to destroy the ring. This is the safety Harry Potter never had until he left his aunt and uncle for Hogwarts. In many great Myths and in real life, there is a longing to have, and return to a Home Sweet Home.

About once a week and sometimes more, we get a call here at the church from people who are about to lose the safety of home sweet home. Sometimes they have a cut off notice from BGE and they face sweltering heat. Sometimes they have an eviction notice from a landlord or bank. What they mostly always have is that fear in their voice that they might not be able to get out of their current mess. Some are cocky, some angry; the vast majority are humble and scared. The most heard story is that an illness in their family drains

the budget or causes the loss of a job. And if they live in West County and have a referral from a social service agency; we help with a check for 40, \$50 or \$60. We are able to help because of your giving. I often wish we could do more; because people need a home sweet home.

When you think about it, one definition of faith is finding a home with God or being at home with God. Faith is that safe place where you can find shelter from the storms of life. Faith is that regenerative place where your thirst is quenched, your soul is fed and your heart is replenished. Home sweet home is a longing and a feeling more than it is a place. Since God is our parent and God's rule extends to every corner of the earth and universe, we can find home when we find God.

There is a connection between home sweet home the structure and being at home with God. Both are places where our needs are met, where we are sheltered, and where we are nurtured. Having a home and having a home with God both give us a strong foundation from which we can succeed and serve. Having a home with God makes your home sweet home sweeter. Having our basic needs met allows you to serve others.

Churches are also homes; at least they should be. Congregations should be places of nurture and renewal. Churches, and worship services should be places where people are fed; places to grow. In healthy churches you find a family and support. For many of us who live far away from families; our church becomes our home base and our anchor; and so we must work to make our church truly sanctuary.

As important as taking care of the family is, we have to remember that churches are not faith spas. Worship is not destination relaxation religion ala luxurious. Yes a church provides love, relationships, safety and support but a church is also and first a place where God is worshipped and served. The prophet Isaiah weighs in on this subject. He is not happy about me centered worship. He is not pleased about religious life where there is quarreling and quibbling over insignificant sideshows. He is not enamored with self serving religion that is self absorbed, pretentious or for show. Faith is a broad umbrella, but the main subject is God. Isaiah hears God's voice within. God, he says is ready to welcome us home, God hopes that we will feel at home but God desires genuine worship. God is interested in faith that goes beyond hymns

and prayers and sermons. Isaiah says that we worship God when we engage in mission. God wants us to take care of our children. God wants us to take care of each other and God wants us to reach out into the community and the world.

Isaiah hears God's voice. "Is not the fast I choose to loose the bonds of injustice....is it not to share bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see them naked to cover them.....then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly.....and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard." Isaiah says that we find faith and home when we serve God's people in need.

We are not perfect – far from it; but we are answering God's wide call. Since our inception as a church, our members have always found a soft spot in their hearts for issues around housing; because housing is an issue for our state and county. According to statistics cited in the Annapolis Capital there are over 10,000 homeless people in Maryland and something like one fifth of them reside in Anne Arundel County. The number of people in our state living in Sub-standard housing is well into the tens of thousands. Housing has always been an issue in the fore front for Ark and Dove members.

The day we moved into this church home in 1996, we became a covenant church with Arundel Habitat which has now merged with Chesapeake Habitat and become Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake. As a covenant church we promise to pray regularly for Habitat, to serve meals, to provide work crews and to financially support the mission to eradicate sub standard housing.

These pictures on the screen are of nine homes that are being built in Baltimore this month by Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake, not too many blocks from where Craig and Suzanne Sparks live. Nine homes will be built on nine construction days and work was begun on the ninth month of the year 2009. We are supporting this construction as we are supporting builds in South Baltimore on the border of North Anne Arundel County and in Annapolis through our mission budget. We also are banking money every week so that we can fund the construction of a home in West Anne Arundel County, through our Walking in Faith Growing in Grace Campaign. We have about \$15,000 in the bank and We should have over \$40,000 saved by the end of the campaign. A house costs about \$100,000 so we still have some distance to travel or some partners to find to make this home a reality. A lot of you know that

Habitat for Humanity does not give homes away but sells them interest free to low income families. This builds pride and partnership.

Here is a picture of two of our members, Valry Fetrow and Kelli Figuero serving a meal at Sarah's House Homeless shelter on Fort Meade. Sarah's house Homeless shelter provides shelter and transitional housing for families and for women with children. Sarah's House is a unique partnership between Anne Arundel County, Catholic Charities, the federal Government, and Protestant and Jewish congregations and volunteer service organizations in Anne Arundel County. Our church has supported Sarah's House since our chartering as a congregation. For the past five or ten years we have been serving one dinner per month to the families in need. Nicole Howe is the Chairperson of our Sarah's House Team and she told me that this week we were a little low on volunteers. October and November are going to be key months for volunteering for Sarah's House as many of us will be working with Winter Relief Homeless shelter and the meals that the VBS students prepared this summer will be running out.

Every year since our chartering our congregation has supported the Patrick Alison transitional homeless shelter for men in Baltimore. We provide clothing and toiletries. We provide money through our support of the mission budget of the presbytery of Baltimore. Many years we give extra directly to the shelter.

This year as you have heard we will be partnering with Arundel House of Hope to provide shelter for homeless men in our own church. For the first time in our history, We will open our building to the homeless. We will extend hospitality in a respectful manner and relief from the cold of late autumn and winter. We will share space for one full week. This is a step up in our efforts to address homelessness and housing issues in our county and it is important that we maintain our existing commitments to Habitat and Sarah House as we take on this additional labor of love. I am very proud of the team that is shepherding our winter relief efforts and the way the congregation is stepping forward to step up our efforts at hands on ministry. It is a remarkable endeavor. I want us to be proud but I want us to keep our Christian goody goody ego's under control.

I think what Isaiah is calling for in his sermon is balance. A church becomes a home for faith and a home for its members when it

both nurtures its members and serves the world in Christ's name. A church is built on solid rock when there is a balance of focus on self and community. If we are too self preoccupied and enamored our foundations are loose like sand. At the moment we are not in danger of focusing too much on people in need; but we need to make sure when we take on new projects that we can sustain all our programs and mission.

Whatever we attempt in mission, be it LOGOS youth ministry, Choirs and Sunday School or be it Habitat Mission Trips and hosting homeless shelters; the important thing is to take the time to step back and reflect on what we are doing and why we are doing it. Whatever we take on as a church we should take on with purpose, faith and thoughtfulness. The last thing we want to do is run around in mission like a church chicken with its head cut off. We need to remember that we worship, we educate and we serve because we are Christ's disciples and Christ calls us to serve. You can see why Isaiah was the favorite prophet of Jesus. Isaiah urges us to keep balance.

Look at what has happened to Acorn, the Association of Community Organizers for Reform Now. They were doing good work to help low income people in communities all over our nation but they

lost their balance and their groundedness and they don't have proper controls in place in their local organizations. Employees have been caught several times now making foolish or overzealous decisions and they are losing federal funding. The National director is now bringing in a consultant to do an organizational gut check and evaluation.

Richard Rohr is a Catholic priest and well-known religious author. I recently used one of his books for a small group. He was very concerned about Christian Activists in the church acting without balance and grounding and so several years ago he founded the center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque. His center trains Christian leaders to be active in the world by finding their spiritual center, integrating a contemplative lifestyle with compassionate service.

I am not suggesting that we all run down to Albuquerque to be trained; but I am always assured when I see that our adult small group offerings are well attended. Not only are small groups places where people balance spirituality and service and places where people grow in faith, but small groups have been the incubators of many new ideas for mission and outreach in this church. Home

sweet home with all its security and solid foundations does give birth to amazing things.